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ABSTRACT

Like school-based management, school-site councils offer some attractive reform possibilities, including broadly based, democratic decision-making; enhanced sensitivity to specific school climates; and widely shared responsibility. Site councils can be ineffective, even harmful, when lacking sufficient support, expertise, and time to succeed. This bulletin suggests ways to construct effective site councils, pointing out councils' possibilities and the demanding steps required to realize them. Chapter 1 discusses the nature of school-site councils, their relationship to school-based management, their many advantages, and necessary development precautions. Chapter 2 shows how to initiate a school-site council, treating council composition, selection of leaders and members, and bylaws, training, and first steps. Chapter 3 describes how councils actually operate; topics include running meetings, making decisions, overcoming common difficulties (such as authoritarian principals, factionalism, lack of time, and accountability), and developing effective roles for principals, teachers, and other council members. The final chapter surveys the relationship between the site council and other groups, including parents, school and district staff, and the school board. The chapter closes by discussing the policy implications of school-site councils. Contains 26 references and a list of 24 interviews. (MLH)

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SCHOOL-SITE COUNCILS

The Hard Work of Achieving Grassroots Democracy

David Peterson - del Mar

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Preface

School-site councils offer no easy way out of the difficulties that schools face. They require a commitment to shared decision-making by diverse people; many hours of training and patient discussion by site-council members; and a communication network that links council members to the district, school staff, and parents. In this era of dwindling resources, school-site councils demand a lot of time and, not infrequently, money.

Many schools are finding that this investment is well worth its costs. School-site councils can tap into many people's capacity for leadership. Their very structure encourages both broad participation in decision-making and vigorous implementation of those decisions. If constructed skillfully by people of good will, school-site councils can revitalize education from a grassroots level, a powerful place to begin.

This Bulletin, by David Peterson - del Mar, introduces the promises and difficulties of this hard work. The text is laden with firsthand accounts. Teachers, principals, secretaries, and parents who have served on school-site councils offer their experiences of success and frustration, struggle and accomplishment.

Peterson - del Mar lives in Portland, where he counsels groups of men who have assaulted their partners. He received a Ph.D. in history from the University of Oregon in 1993 and is writing a book for Harvard University Press on the history of violence against wives in Oregon. He has written several digests and other syntheses for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management and a handbook on superintendent evaluation published by the National School Boards Association.

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Introduction

School-site councils are becoming a key part of school reform across the United States. Like school-based management, a closely related but not identical practice, site councils offer an attractive array of possibilities: broadly based, democratic decision-making; enhanced sensitivity to specific school climates; and widely shared responsibility. Site councils appear to be a beacon of hope as schools wrestle with declining public support and rising social problems.

This Bulletin argues that the presence of school-site councils in no way guarantees successful school reform. Indeed, such councils may do more harm than good if they lack the support of staff, principals, and others. They also require a lot of time and skill. The purpose of this Bulletin is to suggest ways that effective site councils can be constructed. It is intended, then, not simply to point out the possibilities of effective site councils, but the many, often demanding steps required to realize those possibilities.

Chapter 1 outlines the nature of school-site councils, including their relationship to school-based management. It treats both the many advantages of site councils and the precautions that their creators should take.

Chapter 2 addresses how to get a school-site council off the ground. It discusses the composition of site councils and how leaders and other members might be selected. It also covers bylaws, training, and first steps.

The next chapter, chapter 3, is the heart of this Bulletin, for it describes how site councils actually operate. Topics include running meetings; making decisions; common difficulties and how to overcome them; and the special roles of principals, teachers, and others on the councils.

The final chapter surveys the relationships between the site council and other groups within the district. Those groups include parents, school and district staff, and the school board. The chapter closes with a discussion of the policy implications of school-site councils.

This Bulletin is deeply informed by the many administrators, teachers, other staff members, and parents who interrupted their work to share with me

their experience with and viewpoints on school-site councils. It is from them, most of all, that this Bulletin derives its sense of guarded optimism. I am, therefore, indebted to them not only for their time, but for the insight that creating an effective school-site council is both exciting and difficult.

Chapter 1

Weighing the Decision

Starting a school-site council should not be taken lightly. Such councils can be a catalyst for effective school reform. But hastily conceived and poorly organized ones can do more harm than good. School-site councils are seldom effective when their must bear the entire weight of school reform. They are most useful when accompanied by a broadly based and deeply felt movement throughout the school and, ideally, the district to improve student performance.

This chapter begins by defining what school-site councils are and by locating them in the school reform movement. It then addresses the advantages and possible disadvantages of site councils. It closes by discussing how a broadly based sense of ownership in the site councils can greatly enhance their chances for success.

Defining School-Site Councils

School-site councils can be defined broadly as a group of shareholders (staff, students, parents, and community members) who meet regularly to discuss and propose solutions for their schools. But this definition conceals as much as it reveals, for it leaves unanswered the crucial question of authority. Are these councils advisory, or can they mandate policy? Are they essentially run by the principal, or can they override or even fire the principal?

Actual school-site councils do not conform to any one model. Their authority and even their makeup vary dramatically from state to state, even from school to school within a state. The nature of a particular site council depends on its place within larger reform movements such as school-based management and school restructuring.

School-Site Councils and School-Based Management

School-site councils and school-based management are closely related. The latter, according to John Lindelow and James Heynderickx (1989), "is a system of administration in which the school site is the primary unit of educational decision-making." In other words, school-based management shifts the locus of control from central-office administrators to the school level.

School-based management entails redistributing power within the district, but not necessarily within the school. Indeed, principals typically gain a great deal of power in school-based management, power that they may or may not distribute within the school community. As Lindelow and Heynderickx put it: "School-based management is more of an 'administrative' decentralization that preserves the notion of professional control of education." Hence school-based management can occur with or without school-site councils.

By the same token, school-site councils can occur with or without school-based management. Site councils do not necessarily affect the distribution of power, authority, and responsibility within the district. They can be very active and effective without taking over decisions that have been made by central-office staff or the school board.

School-based management and site councils are similar at least in that they imply a decentralization of authority. But the former focuses on decentralization within the district, often among professional administrators only, and the latter focuses on decentralization within the school, often among a broad array of administrators, staff, and community members.

Much of the literature on school-based management is also applicable to school-site councils. This Bulletin will utilize some of it. But readers should bear in mind the crucial difference between the two movements to avoid equating one with the other.

School-Site Councils and School Restructuring

Site councils are also similar to, yet different from, school restructuring. Proponents of school restructuring argue that the nation's public educational system is quickly becoming outmoded and ineffective in the face of massive social, economic, and technological changes. Restructuring is a broad reform movement that seeks to improve student learning through a variety of structural changes, such as varied learning environments, curriculum integration, and performance-based measurements (David Conley 1993).

School restructuring often entails revising one's understanding of what constitutes the school community. Local business people and professionals can make public education more stimulating and marketable for students. Social-service agencies can bring to schools resources sorely needed by

children harmed by poverty and family violence. Parents and other community members can volunteer as tutors, mentors, and planners to assist the school (David Peterson - del Mar 1993).

School-site councils mesh with the restructuring movement's emphasis on creating new structures for school improvement. Both typically bring more shareholders into the school. But, as with school-based management, restructuring does not require the presence of school-site councils. By the same token, site councils can exist without schools restructuring themselves in other ways. Indeed, one of this Bulletin's central arguments is that site councils should not be viewed as some sort of magical solution to the stubborn problems that schools face. School councils are most effective when they are part of a broadly based reform program. Their mere presence guarantees very little, perhaps nothing.

Advantages of School-Site Councils

As discussed above, school-site councils should not be conflated with other reforms, such as school-based management or school restructuring. And site councils in and of themselves may signify and accomplish very little.

But effective site councils often bring a host of advantages to schools, advantages that can be crucial to overall school improvement. John Lindelow and his coauthors (1989) list three major advantages of participatory decision-making: higher quality decisions, higher employee satisfaction, and improved relations between staff and management. These are substantial and powerful advantages.

Assumptions of Participatory Decision-Making

Participatory decision-making rests on several assumptions or beliefs about human nature and human relations. Barbara Hansen and Carl Marberger (1989) list several that apply particularly to schools:

1. People are trustworthy.
2. People are most apt to change when they can help determine that change.
3. Those closest to implementation are the best qualified to determine its course.
4. Local decisions can be made most effectively without bureaucratic interference.
5. It is easier to change people's behavior than their beliefs, so if structures are changed, behavior is apt to follow.
6. People are less antagonistic when they work together.

7. The necessary resources for school improvement already exist in the school community.
8. Parents are important to their children's education.
9. Student involvement in decision-making facilitates their socialization into responsible participation in a democratic society.

These beliefs or assumptions add up to a generally positive view of people's potential to effect salutary change. A school community in which a large number of members take issue with the above beliefs is probably not ripe for school-site councils. But if the above beliefs enjoy widespread support, site councils can play a key role in organizing and abetting positive grassroots change.

School-Site Councils and Intra-School Relations

Members of site councils often comment that the organizations help them to feel like a more integral part of their school. Ann Adams, a secretary at Dayton High School in Dayton, Oregon, remarks that membership on a site council means that "you know what's going on. You're there." Malcolm Munson, student retention coordinator at Mazama High School in Klamath Falls, Oregon, notes that "in most schools... you get an administrator up there talking" about school issues "much like a traditional classroom." Site councils instead offer "people a forum in which to speak their mind."

Participation in site councils commonly leads to rich interchanges within the school. Don Zupan, a health and photography teacher at Mazama High School, remarks that the distribution of site members throughout the building leads to "a lot of positive communication" between people who once just traded greetings in the halls. The inclusion of parents in site councils broadens this sense of community. "I get a feeling of a 'we' rather than a 'you versus me' feeling," says Dan Barnum, principal at Eugene, Oregon's Roosevelt Middle School.

This broadened sense of participation and responsibility can defuse grudges between teachers and principals. Bob Simonson, the principal at Mazama High School, offers the example of staff who come to him with specific complaints about school policy. Under the old system, he would make a decision that would likely alienate or at least anger some staff members. With a school site-council in place, however, policy decisions are broadly shared. Hence it is more difficult for staff members to blame a single administrator for decisions they do not agree with.

School-Site Councils and Quality Decision-Making

Site councils not only take the pressure off of principals for making some tough decisions, they also enhance the likelihood of a good decision being reached. If several heads are better than one, then effective groups should create more useful decisions than isolated individuals.

School-site councils typically include a broad range of perspectives. Jan Hamblin, the principal's secretary at Mazama High School, argues that classified employees bring an essential perspective to site councils. Classroom experience can create a sort of tunnel vision, while classified staff see students in a broader context. "I have to be able to recognize all the areas of the school because this position requires that," she notes. Classified employees, teachers, parents, community members, and administrators bring unique perspectives and experiences to decisions that no single person can incorporate.

Site councils also help ensure that decisions are followed by constructive action rather than misinformed rumor mongering. Jeffrey Eiseman and his colleagues (1989) point out that site councils "greatly enhance the flow of accurate information regarding implementation within the school." Since a large number of people made a given decision, a large number of them can accurately represent the decision to the rest of the school community. Sharon Quackenbush, a counselor at Lost River Junior/Senior High School in Merrill, Oregon, asserts that site teams are "a way to get teachers to buy into change and [to make] it happen." People naturally have more incentive to implement decisions that they had a hand in making.

Simonson offers an example of student dress codes to illustrate how much easier it is to implement a policy made by a school council than one made by a solitary principal. Some teachers in a traditional school who object to students wearing hats in classrooms brought their concern to the principal, who then decreed that the practice will end. Many teachers did not feel that hats were a problem, however, and chose not to enforce the principal's decision. But when the site council in Simonson's own school created the no-hat rule, teacher compliance became very high. Teachers chose to enforce a rule that they had made. "If the majority wins, it's not a fight," remarks Anne Powell, an English teacher and site council member at Lost River Junior/Senior High School.

Ross Zerchykov (1992) contrasts school councils to an "undemocratic" and "reactive" ad hoc response that "forces schools to always listen to and deal with the most squeaky wheels," people who "may not be representative of the community at large." Two outspoken and articulate staff members can seem very intimidating to a single decision-maker. But they appear much less formidable to a group of peer-elected council members who do not share their concerns or perspectives.

Finally, site councils can be an ideal format for learning about effective school reform. Jan Baxter, principal of Hollydale School in Gresham, Oregon, calls them "a marvelous tool for educating parents." As in so many other areas, creating a site council does not guarantee that its members will learn much about the work before them, let alone that they will do that work effectively. But their creation offers exciting possibilities to administrators and others eager for formats in which to teach staff and parents about education.

Precautions

The manifold and glittering advantages of creating school-site councils can tempt school leaders into hasty, ill-considered action. Kenneth Eastwood and Marilyn Tallerico (1990) advise educational leaders to pose and answer affirmatively three tough questions before proceeding with site-based teams:

1. Will the district be willing and able to offer the necessary development and release time for staff to be effective team members?
2. Will district administrators truly accept and work with collaborative decision-making?
3. Do staff members realize the complex and lengthy nature of the school improvement process?

These questions identify three key issues that must be fully and thoroughly addressed before instituting a school council: sufficient time for training and participation; the cooperation of administrators, particularly the principal; and an awareness of how difficult and demanding the council's work will be.

Finding Time

Most staff members will readily agree that they are pressed for time. Administrators, teachers, and other staff members have seen their responsibilities mount, often as their numbers have declined. Hence any measure that promises to consume educators' most precious commodity must be examined very closely.

Even strong advocates of school-site councils readily admit that it takes a lot of time. Ed Smith, principal at Reynolds High School in Troutdale, Oregon, believes in shared decision-making because "it produces the best possible decisions. We work toward the quality decision rather than the quick decision," he adds. But quick decisions, by definition, have the advantage of allowing staff to move on to other matters—and there are a lot

of matters to move on to! The formation of site councils "does not simplify the running of a school," concludes Christine Reising, assistant principal at Crater High School in Central Point, Oregon. "It takes so much longer to do things" when a shared decision-making process is used, remarks David Strodtman, principal of Thomas Jefferson High School in Denver, Colorado (Ann Bradley and Lynn Olson 1993).

Administrators and other staff should budget ample time for site councils. Relatively few council members will be fully prepared for their new duties. Hence, in addition to allocating time for meeting, districts and schools must set aside resources for training, and prospective members should approach the council as they would a new job that requires a new set of skills to be learned and new bodies of knowledge to be mastered.

Simplicity and brevity should not be the prime criteria for deciding how schools run themselves, of course. Site councils, furthermore, hold out the eventual possibility of saving staff time as well as improving students' education. But staff at schools considering site councils should be prepared to invest a great deal of work into the process before seeing much in the way of tangible results. Schools that are not prepared for this often painful sacrifice will likely be quickly disillusioned by the shared decision-making process and poorly served by their site councils.

Site Councils and Administrators

On paper, at least, site councils require that administrators will need to start sharing authority that they are accustomed to exercising alone. This is most true of building-level supervisors, but site councils may ultimately impinge on decisions made by central-office personnel and even school board members. It is essential, then, that lines of authority be spelled out as specifically as possible before school councils are instituted and that all levels of district staff share an understanding of site councils' roles.

School councils will find it very difficult to function effectively if principals do not want to work with them. Many council members, after all, are under the principal's authority. She or he exercises considerable control over their salary, even their actual employment. Principals are also privy to a lot of information that site councils require to function effectively. Widespread support of a school-site council by teachers and classified staff greatly enhances its chances of success. But a principal's commitment to shared decision-making is essential to its success.

School councils must avoid the other extreme—overstepping their boundaries. Most school councils do not have authority from their district to pluck decisions out of the superintendent's hands, let alone out of the school board's hands. Gary Marx, associate executive director, office of communi-

cations, of the American Association of School Administrators, cautions that site councils "should not try to take on the role of principal" or superintendent or school board, that they "should not venture beyond [their] limits of expertise." School councils that gradually take on larger concerns and responsibilities and that focus on local issues are much more apt to succeed and much less apt to face opposition from the district.

In sum, it matters less where a given district or school draws the boundaries of power wielded by various groups and individuals than that those boundaries are clear and widely understood. Nothing is more demoralizing to a school-site council than investing vast amounts of time and energy in a project only to find that they have overstepped their mandate. Few things are as frustrating to an administrator as lobbying hard for the creation of school-site councils only to find that council members refuse to accept the authority that has been handed to them.

Preparing Staff

Many staff find that serving on a school-site council is much more difficult than they had expected. Time is a major consideration. Simonson remarks that a few staff members at his school referred to the council as "teacher detention." Reising notes that in some cases staff primarily think of site councils "as a whole lot more work."

School-site councils run counter to some deep traditions. Munson observes that "naturally people want to look at someone and say 'What are we going to do?' " Site councils are based on a belief that there is no single source of authority; it forces people accustomed to simply following directives to look within themselves and dialogue with others for answers. This can be frightening. Teachers may also resent committing time to administrative duties that used to fall to the principal.

Shared decision-making broadens responsibility in ways that may not be comfortable to staff members. In traditional schools, staff members sometimes unite around their collective dissatisfaction with a principal's decisions. But with school-site councils, notes Zupan, sometimes staff members "wind up being the heavy instead of an administrator." Such feelings intensify, of course, if a council begins making decisions about cutting programs and personnel. School-site councils can bring a painful reconfiguration of school relations.

Again, the difficulties and challenges of these new roles and responsibilities to school staff need not derail the creation of school-site councils. All the people quoted in this section strongly support site councils. Their warnings serve not as an argument to choose traditional patterns of authority over more broadly shared ones, but rather as an indication of how difficult that

transition can be. They advise school staff to count the costs of that transition before they undertake it.

Moving Forward Together

As discussed above, school-site councils are no panacea. To thrive, they require considerable resources, particularly many people's time. A clear understanding of where one group's or person's responsibilities end and another's begin is also essential. Site councils do not work well in isolation. They should be perceived as constituting a central part of school reform, not the entire school reform program.

Cooperation

Reising notes that school-site councils are a vehicle for creating schools that are "a collaborative team." But collaboration must often precede council formation. Eastwood and Tallerico assert that their research "suggests that, prior to forging ahead with improvement efforts, a cooperative ethos must be generated." As one of their interviewees puts it, "gaining support from the union and staff prior to the formation of [school improvement] teams helps to reduce sabotage and blocking." School-site councils can abet the formation of a cooperative ethos, but such councils are unlikely to create that ethos from scratch.

School councils and other forms of broad-based decision-making and collaboration are most apt to succeed when prospective members participate in the initial planning. Marilyn Higgins, volunteer development coordinator at the Oregon Department of Education, urges schools to invite parents into the formative stages of school reform so that "we all learn together instead of creating gaps." In other words, all aspects of the reform process should, as much as possible, model the intended outcome of the reform: a system in which the authority and responsibility for decision-making are widely shared.

Site Councils and Reform

The presence of school-site councils does not guarantee that they will be effective agents for school reform. Much hinges on how they define their duties. "The problem is when the site council becomes a school-based school board" that focuses on school governance rather than school improvement, remarks Conley. Site councils may simply add another layer of initiative-stifling bureaucracy, or they can "prod the school toward improvement," he explains.

Effective, reform-oriented site councils do not surface spontaneously.

Rather, they are part of a long-term process of reform and shared decision-making. They require a school in which the principal is willing to share authority and the staff is willing to invest time and shoulder new responsibilities. In fact, they require a school in which the principal and a substantial majority of staff members have both counted the costs of fundamental change and decided that the change is worth the cost.

"The site council can begin to be a place to examine where the school is and where it ought to be," remarks Conley. By bringing together diverse parts of the school community for indepth discussion and broadly shared decision-making, school-site councils can constitute an integral part of school renewal. These very processes of corporate dialogue and decision-making create the new structures, policies, and understandings that constitute school renewal.

But, again, school-site councils are seldom capable of creating this sort of renewal from thin air. Considerable dialogue and planning toward school reform should occur before the councils are created; otherwise they will simply reflect the stagnant status quo. School-site councils can be an integral part of school renewal, but they cannot bear its entire weight.

Chapter 2

Getting Started

Chapter 1 argues that school-site councils cannot bear the entire weight of school renewal and that much discussion and agreement regarding school reform should precede their formation. Principals and other administrators must be prepared to share authority. Prospective members must be committed to acquiring the skills to wield authority effectively.

But how does a school go about the work of actually setting up a working site council? This chapter addresses that question. It begins by discussing the membership and selection of site councils. It then discusses creating bylaws and obtaining adequate training. It closes with an overview of how school-site councils begin the decision-making process.

Selecting Members

The question of what sorts of people will be on the site council and how they will be selected is extremely important. The way a school resolves this issue reveals much about its internal power structure. Questions of representation are inevitably questions of power. So are questions of selection. A council composed mostly of parents suggests a very different set of concerns from one made up largely of teachers. A council whose members are selected by the principal will begin with a very different set of assumptions than one elected by peers.

The council's makeup and selection process will also affect how the council relates to the rest of the school community. "Who is on the council and how they get there has a great impact on the council's ability to perform its function of unifying constituencies and coordinating resources," asserts Zerchykov. This question of how a site council is constituted may be more consequential than any issue that the council itself confronts.

Who Belongs

Membership in site councils varies widely from place to place. In Chicago, the majority of site council members must be parents or community members. Kentucky school councils have two parents, three teachers, and a principal. Oregon councils have a majority of classroom teachers plus at least one classified staff member, parent, and building supervisor. In all three instances, state law mandates composition.

But even state mandates often leave room for choices. In Oregon, for example, councils can expand beyond the minimum membership of seven. Hence a council of thirteen would add three teachers plus three other representatives from the other three groups (classified staff, parents, or administrators). Some schools choose to have members who discuss issues but do not vote. Others have paired members who attend regularly but alternate in casting their shared vote. Even fairly specific legislative mandates often allow for flexibility.

Peter Robertson and Sophia Kwong (1993) argue that diversity is more often a strength than a liability in site councils. They point out that a diverse council "can generate broader-based commitment to the decisions made." A council that only represents a small portion of the school community is apt to find that its decisions are supported by only a small portion of that community. They point out that heterogeneous councils "can also enable a better understanding of potential barriers and sources of resistance to implementation of those decisions." Such councils may take longer to reach their decisions, but in the process of making their decisions they work through issues that would have arisen at a later, less convenient time in a more narrowly constituted council.

Particular effort should be made to include on councils people from traditionally underrepresented groups: people of color, the working class, and classified staff, for example. Inclusiveness is wise, as well as fair. Groups composed of people from cultures that reflect collectivist rather than individualistic orientations are "likely to display more cooperative as opposed to competitive behavior," state Robertson and Kwong.

People naturally tend to gravitate toward the familiar, toward their peers. Those charged with the responsibility of selecting site council members must check this understandable tendency in the interest of creating a council that is representative and effective. It may be useful to think of the site council as a piece of steel whose strength resides in its combinations of metals, or as an ecosystem whose flexibility depends on its diverse combinations of plants, animals, and soils.

Selection

As with the council's composition, selection is often conditioned but not determined by state law. In Oregon, for example, staff must be elected to site councils by their peers. But these elections need not simply be at-large elections that a particularly powerful department may dominate. Some schools break their elections up by departments to ensure that all are represented: language and arts, social sciences, science and math, and vocational education, for example. Elementary schools may decide to break their elections up by grade levels so that a particularly popular bloc of fourth-grade teachers, for example, does not fill all the teachers' seats on the council. Mazama High School requires that of the seven certified staff members on its site council at least three must be men and three women (Mazama High School n.d.).

Carol Black, a specialist in school reform with the Oregon Department of Education, urges schools to consider the broadest possible number of employees as potential council members. Bus drivers and cafeteria workers should not, for example, be dismissed out of hand. She advises starting with a list of all staff and asking each to decide if they will let their name remain on the list rather than simply asking for volunteers, a practice that often intimidates gifted but shy people.

The actual formation of a site council is a particularly important time for principals to curb any desires to dominate the process. A survey in New York State by Eastwood and Tallerico identified administrators' appointment of team members "as a strong inhibitor to optimum team functioning."

For this reason, too, site councils often select someone other than the principal as their chair. This is not to say that principals do not bring unique and essential gifts to the site council. Nor is it to deny that they are often by far the most knowledgeable site member about such issues as school reform and group process. But the very weight of their well-established authority can easily stifle the growth of other council members and the overall vitality of the group.

In Oregon, parents are selected to site councils by a variety of means. Some are elected from parent groups. Others are appointed by the site council or an administrator. Baxter chose the latter procedure for the first parent on her school's site council to ensure that the parent was "someone everyone can work with." Zerchykov points out that parent elections can discriminate against parents who do not ordinarily participate in school functions and suggests setting aside some appointive positions for representatives of these groups. School councils can thereby gain the perspectives and, often, the participation of a group of constituents who had been on the school's margins.

Bylaws

Creating a new organization typically means a certain amount of paperwork. This is particularly the case with groups who wield some degree of formal authority and power. A set of bylaws provides a foundation for the organization, a touchstone to return to when council members disagree over the scope of the council's authority or how it is to go about its business.

Guidelines for Bylaws

Zerchykov remarks that site councils "need a 'charter' that specifies how they relate to the school bureaucracy." This document should identify rules that cannot be broken and should specify which groups or individuals have authority in given areas. "The overall rule for bylaws," he concludes, "is to keep them simple and flexible; the ideal is clarity and order without rigidity and needless complexity."

Black underscores this emphasis on simplicity and flexibility. She recommends that councils build their policies as they go along rather than beginning with a detailed document that must anticipate all sorts of conditions and contingencies that the council has not yet experienced. Filling out bylaws as the council progresses makes for a useful document that removes what could be an intimidating stumbling block from the top of the council's agenda.

Bylaws: An Example

Mazama High School's site council bylaws provide an example of the issues and procedures that such a document can address (Mazama High School). The heart of its bylaws are contained in articles 3 through 6, which spell out its purposes and powers, composition and selection, internal rules, and relationship to a broader staff organization.

The section on the council's purposes and powers is fairly detailed. It ties the council's duties to the state legislative mandates, thereby helping to ensure that the council will fulfill the legislation's intent. Mazama's site council also added some purposes of its own in this section, such as that it "will be a source for information and research concerning education" and that its decisions will be discussed by the staff as a whole in another meeting.

Article 4 addresses the council's composition. It specifies that the group is to have at least thirteen members, with a certain minimum number of certified staff, classified staff, administrators, parents, and students. It also specifies terms of offices and minimum attendance requirements for keeping one's council seat.

The final two articles identify the council's internal affairs and its relationship to the broader staff. They specify how the bylaws can be changed and who is responsible for providing minutes of the meetings. They also specify who is allowed to participate in the meetings of the larger staff group and the relationship between the larger group and the site council.

These bylaws are not lengthy. In less than three pages they effectively lay out the school-site council's responsibilities, membership matters, meeting procedures, and relationship to the larger school.

Training

Effective school-site councils earn their accomplishments the hard way: through purposeful education and training. As discussed in the previous chapter, prospective members should be aware that they are contemplating a responsibility that will involve a considerable investment of time and the acquisition of new skills. New site councils confronting their work are not unlike a first-grade student at the beginning of the school year. They already possess some of the requisite skills to succeed, but there is also much to learn.

Making Training a Priority

Eastwood and Tallerico's survey identified skill development as the most crucial element in creating effective school-improvement planning teams. "Respondents emphasized the frustration felt when teams were expected to forge into immediate action before receiving any training in the development of skills necessary to engage in successful collaborative planning and group decision-making," they note. New site councils often feel an understandable need to make things happen, to prove themselves. But the wisest first step is to get training on how to best go about making things happen.

Different types of council members may need different types of training. Parents will probably require an introduction to how the school functions and to some rudimentary educational theory. Staff members may need training on how to participate actively rather than simply complying with administrators' dictates (Bradley and Olson). Administrators may need to learn the intricacies of group decision-making.

The Specifics of Training

Many experts in school-site councils agree that training in group process should be at the center of council training. Ed Smith, principal of

Reynolds High School, recommends training in how systems work and in how to dialogue effectively. Black encourages site councils to get trained in consensus building, trust building, and developing models of decision-making. Patricia Gest (1993), director of operations for the Oregon School Employees Association, recommends that councils pursue training in group processing, communication, decision-making, resolving disputes, and active listening. Joanne Flint, principal at Dayton High School in Dayton, Oregon, urges training in group processing, leadership, and team building. Without such training, she notes, principals will repeatedly find themselves doing a lot of teaching and counseling as the group runs into obstacles.

Flint recommends at least two days of training for site council members at the council's inception, and two days per year afterwards. An annual retreat can serve as an opportunity for training, planning, and team bonding, she notes. Hansen and Marburger recommend that councils hold their training away from the school, preferably at a hotel or conference center. Sharing living space with each other, if only for a weekend, can build a strong sense of team membership.

The availability of training varies widely from district to district and state to state. Some states offer regular workshops and consulting services for site councils. Larger districts may employ people who specialize in teaching groups skills. Members of the site council, school staff, or community may be able to lead at least part of the training. In any event, the training should be both regular and of a high quality.

First Decisions

A school-site council has been selected through elections and perhaps appointments. It has established at least tentative ground rules for making decisions. It has received some training. It is time to begin. But how should it begin?

The Weight of History

School-site councils often start small. "When we started, our concerns were that, up in the second-floor men's restroom, there's not enough toilet paper," recalls a parent member of a Colorado site council (Bradley and Olson). Likewise, Black cites the example of a site council that anticipated making great changes but began by focusing on such issues as who should have storage room keys.

Black also points out that a school's recent history plays a large role in how its site council will at first function. In the above instance, for example, the school had been headed until recently by an authoritarian principal. Staff

members and parents may have chafed against this authority for years, but the principal's leadership style nevertheless habituated them to a passivity that remained long after the principal's departure.

Growing into New Roles

Relatively few members of any site council are likely to have much experience with collaboratively planning the running of a complex educational institution. Bill Kentta, curriculum and staff development coordinator for the Eugene (Oregon) Public Schools, remarks that "not very many teachers, parents, or administrators for that matter, have been trained in group process." It is to be expected, then, that school-site councils will require some months to grow into their responsibilities, to acquire the training and experience that only time can bring. Site councils should, if possible, begin with relatively modest issues and decisions and gradually work into more substantial ones. As Jim Carnes, director of school board leadership and school improvement for the Oregon School Boards Association puts it, "councils should focus on process first... and then a product."

Gayland Gump, a parent on Reynolds High School's site council, also cautions against quick decision-making. The site council, he notes, "is where policy for a school is decided." A necessary step in deciding policy is developing "a vision of what education can be" for a particular school and its community. Policy and vision cannot be decided quickly. There should be a philosophical grounding, nurtured in extensive discussions, before big changes are made. Decisions lacking such a grounding typically lead to "piecemeal" rather than "systemic" change, he points out.

Not all site councils will be able to postpone major decisions. Some may be immediately faced with large budget cuts, for example. They may even be charged with deciding which staff will be terminated. Such decisions tax the resources and cohesion of even veteran councils, let alone new ones. Hence it is important for site councils to form well before an anticipated budget crisis, not at its onset.

In sum, effective school-site councils arise from months and years of thoughtful and sustained planning and training. They are not created from scratch in an afternoon. Planners should carefully consider how the council will represent the school community and how that community should go about selecting representatives to the council. Bylaws serve to outline a council's responsibilities and procedures. Training prepares it to do its work. Site councils can of course be created and begin their work without these careful preparations. But the work of such councils is unlikely to bring many benefits to the schools they serve.

Chapter 3

Nuts and Bolts

The two previous chapters surveyed the advantages and possible disadvantages of school-site councils and the steps involved in getting one started. This chapter addresses a site council's actual functioning, its work.

The chapter begins with an overview of what site councils commonly decide. It then discusses how the councils go about making those decisions. It identifies some common difficulties that site councils encounter in their work and how those difficulties can be overcome. It concludes by treating particular site council members' roles, including principals, teachers, classified staff, and parents or other community members.

What Site Councils Decide

There is of course no universal list of responsibilities for school-site councils. The issues and decisions that a particular council works on depend on the state mandates that it works within as well as more local factors.

State Mandates

Oregon mandates three specific duties for school-site councils: developing and implementing professional growth and career opportunities for staff, improving the school's instructional program, and coordinating the implementation of a comprehensive school reform act passed in 1991 (Oregon Department of Education 1993). But the Oregon Department of Education also notes that the councils' duties are not limited to these three areas. Conley, furthermore, notes that the "law is pretty open ended" as to exactly what is meant by the three mandates, that schools over time might choose to interpret the three areas quite broadly.

Other states have established more extensive responsibilities for

school-site councils. In Kentucky, for example, site councils are to oversee the curriculum, staff time, student assignment to classes and programs, the daily and weekly school schedule, use of school space, instructional practices, and school discipline (Eddie Van Meter 1991). In Chicago, perhaps the most widely known example of school-based management, school councils have even more power, including responsibility for hiring and firing principals.

Diversity

The Oregon Department of Education urges respect for diversity: "Expect school councils and schools to be different from one another." Black identifies "history" as probably "the major influence" in what site councils decide to work on. State mandates, then, are intended more as a broad framework of responsibilities, not a detailed roadmap of what site councils should do. That decision should vary from site to site, depending on each school's unique history, culture, and needs.

Smith reports that Reynolds High School's site council has focused on a variety of reform issues, including how to meet the state's new requirements for graduation, how to assess student performance and learning styles, and training for staff and community members on school reforms. Anne Powell, an English teacher at Lost River Junior and Senior High School in Merrill, Oregon, notes that her council has spent much of its time planning senior projects, a combination of oral, written, and other work that is becoming a graduation requirement.

Carlos Azcoitia, principal of John Spry Community School in Chicago, emphasizes the work that his school council performed in creating a safer environment for students: securing evictions for neighbors involved in illegal activities, reducing graffiti, and improving police relations and response, for example (Karen Prager 1993). This set of concerns would have seemed nonsensical in a low-crime suburban area. The nature of a particular site council's work agenda depends on the particular needs at that site.

School-Site Council Meetings

Most of us spend a significant part of our professional lives in meetings. Relatively few of us ever learn much about how to run or participate in them. Efficiency is particularly crucial at school-site council meetings, where many people's time is very dear and where dissimilar people with dissimilar priorities can easily clash. Site councils, furthermore, must strive not only to come up with the best possible decision, but to do it in a way that will ensure the highest possible level of cooperation by all members.

The Group Process

By definition, group decision-making demands extensive interchange. Smith notes that Reynolds' site council strives to keep dialoguing until consensus is reached. They try to avoid polarized arguments or premature position-taking or votes, practices that typically lead to standoffs, or at least divisiveness and hard feelings. Visitors to council meetings might "think that we talk a lot," Smith remarks, but that talk is an essential part of the group's thinking process, the context in which issues are explored, ideas surface, and resolution is reached. This sort of discussion, of course, requires substantial training and discipline.

Skillful site members try to avoid premature decision-making. One points out that she and other members of her school-site council will step in and stop a vote if they sense that all members are not ready for the issue to be settled. This helps to ensure that council members will respect and support decisions that they did not favor. Simonson notes that his council never votes on an issue the first time that it is brought up. The Mazama High School site council also uses a visual check to get a quick sense of members' standing on a particular vote: one finger for "yes," two for "OK," and three for "cannot agree with."

Hansen and Marberger identify steps that facilitate full participation and a high level of group harmony. They recommend that councils begin their meetings by making sure that every member is drawn into the group, and they urge groups to monitor both members' feelings and their level of participation. Discussion summaries avoid misunderstandings or disagreements over people's remarks. If discussion on a particular issue has reached an impasse, stopping to identify the apparent blocks to resolving the issue will probably be more useful than an extended argument.

Smith points out that a school council must do more than discuss. "There is a need to act," he asserts. But he adds that these actions are often contingent, certainly subject to revision and refinement. A council's particular decisions, then, are part of a process, not the last word. In this environment of dialogue and process there are decisions and actions, but "there's no event to be arrived at," he explains.

The Responsibilities of Individual Council Members

Creating and maintaining a successful group process is ultimately the responsibility of each council member. The Kansas State Board of Education (1992) identifies several groundrules for participating in discussions:

1. Come prepared to discuss.
2. Listen carefully to others and try to learn from them.
3. Ask for illustrations or examples if you do not understand what

another member is saying.

4. Participate rather than being passive.
5. Avoid dominating the discussion; give others an opportunity to speak.
6. Don't insist that other council members agree with you.
7. Disagree when you must, but don't be hostile about it.
8. Don't waste time arguing points of fact that can be looked up.

Site council members from Mazama High School also recommend assertiveness over passivity or aggressiveness. Zupan advises council members to both "stick to your guns" and to "accept the democratic process." Munson urges members to remember that "you're here for a reason," so "step up and speak your mind." Being a skillful school-site council member, then, demands a skillful combination of asserting one's own views and respecting the views of others. It demands active participation in and respect for an intense democratic process in which one must contribute to a decision without attempting to dictate or control it.

On Consensus

Often, consensus requires extensive discussion and the consent of all group members for a decision to be made. Van Meter summarizes its pros and cons. Simply voting on an issue, before consensus has been reached, "allows the wishes of differing constituencies to be expressed clearly" and "makes explicit the final decision." Consensus, on the other hand, "promotes greater ownership in the decision and helps to minimize the amount of divisiveness among the decision-making group." Since harmony is so crucial to school-site councils and to school reform, particularly in implementing decisions, many councils use consensus.

Consensus requires active participation and compromise. Susan Weston (1993) asserts that "consensus decision-making requires a commitment of all members [to] listen closely to each other's concerns and to try to find solutions that address those concerns." At Oregon's South Albany High School, the consensus model means that council members who vote against a measure must offer a positive alternative (Jim Linhart and others 1993). Consensus demands both time and commitment, good faith and compromise.

Consensus is seldom defined as complete agreement among every member. Powell and her fellow council members strive for an outcome that each can "support... without putting it down." Linhart and his colleagues at South Albany High School understand consensus as meaning "that each person will indicate advocacy of neutrality and will support the decision for a specified period of time." If the council cannot reach this point, a vote of 75

percent is sufficient to declare a stalemate. In this eventuality, an issue is either dropped, referred to a committee for further study, or passed if at least 85 percent of the full school council votes for it.

Weston argues that councils following a pure consensus model should establish some policies to be followed in the event of a stalemate. This policy could simply be an understanding that the school would continue under the status quo until the council set some new rules. She suggests that the council might consider voting when the stalemate "could cause severe operating problems." This might occur when a school needs to select a principal or file its budget, for example.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is one method of defusing strong disagreements before they get started. The Kansas State Board of Education (1992) identifies several guidelines:

1. Use two people to record ideas, so that no ideas are lost.
2. List every idea offered.
3. Don't judge any of the ideas during the brainstorming process.
4. Be concise when offering ideas.
5. State your idea rather than trying to sell it.
6. Don't discuss any of the ideas until all ideas are recorded.
7. Work quickly.
8. Don't stop recording ideas until the flow markedly slows.

One advantage of brainstorming is that it encourages people to consider a broad range of solutions before they have a strong sense of ownership in their own. Brainstorming, after all, is a quintessential group activity, an intense social experience in which one's sense of belonging and participating can lead to understandings that are widely shared.

Researching Issues

Gathering further information on a topic can break a stalemate. Peggy Upham, a parent on Roosevelt Middle School's site council, notes that they may do additional research on an issue when consensus does not seem imminent. Black urges site council members to base their decisions and priorities on hard data rather than emotional responses. Student behavior, for example, can be better gauged through assessing dropout and discipline rates than from drawing hasty conclusions from a single, well-publicized incident.

Quackenbush recalls that data gathering served to clarify quickly the goals of her site council. The collection of material on community and school

demographics and student achievement made it possible to see exactly what problems they faced. Such material can incorporate a wide variety of information, including test scores, attendance records for both students and teachers, student hours on given subjects, student/teacher ratios, teacher turnover, the number of curricular choices, the percentile of students in extracurricular activities, annual student turnover, and the proportion of recent graduates who go on to jobs or college (Hansen and Marburger).

Common Difficulties

This Bulletin has already touched on some of the difficulties that site councils commonly face, such as ill-defined agendas or lack of training. Many other problems can arise over time, as the councils move further into their work. We'll examine four common roadblocks—authoritarian principals, factionalism, lack of time, and the issue of who is accountable for decisions—and then, in the following section, look at some possible solutions.

Authoritarian Principals

The great majority of school-site councils include the school's principal, the individual who is supposed to know more about the school than anyone else. Principals automatically wield a great deal of power on site councils, partly by virtue of their knowledge and access to information, but also because they supervise a substantial number of site council members. Authoritarian or vindictive principals do not, then, make for open and honest communication within the councils. A teacher on a site council in Utah notes that teachers are reluctant to bring up tough issues at council meetings: "I'd like to speak my mind, have opinions... but I have to be a 'yes man'... teachers are extremely vulnerable" (Betty Malen and Rodney Ogawa 1985).

Principals who are reluctant to share power may express frustration over their site council's lack of interest in the group's work. "I can't get the SIC (School Improvement Council) to have any initiative," a South Carolina principal complains. "I have to call meetings; call the chair; do the agenda; remind everyone. If the secretary doesn't come, they expect me to do the minutes" (David Monrad and Jean Norman 1992). Yet the chair of this site council notes that the principal does not want the site council to have much autonomy and sometimes tries to control its meetings.

Other council members complain of principals who primarily use the site council to make decisions that administrators want no part of. Indeed, one Utah principal admits that principals sometimes use site councils to "take the heat off" by asking them to decide which staff should be cut, for example.

Factionalism

The line between principals and other staff members is not the only one along which site councils divide. School staff may have difficulty working with parents and other community members. Some teachers on Utah site councils expressed strong reservations over parents making decisions related to school personnel. They have made such remarks as "parents shouldn't be talking about teachers" and "parents don't have the skill to do this" (Malen and Ogawa). Parents, on the other hand, express a desire to be informed about personnel issues.

In some cases, mutual distrust between individuals and groups within the site council can become so strong that decisions are reached and implemented only with great difficulty. John Easton and his colleagues (1993) identified two such councils among the fourteen they recently surveyed in Chicago. These councils' meetings featured a great deal of activity, but of a counterproductive nature. Members made many motions and requests for information but seldom reached a decision. Antagonism and suspicion between council members ran high. One described the group as "11 pit bulls guarding their territory" (Easton and others).

Gest is concerned over the paucity of classified staff members on Oregon's school-site councils. State law mandates that school councils contain at least one such representative compared to at least four teachers (certified staff). Yet classified employees make up nearly half of district employees. "It's really unfortunate the teachers are having that overwhelming majority," she notes. Gest warns that teachers may "try to represent the classified" people's interests when the two groups' interests differ. As school councils proceed with their work, inequities in representation may hinder their operation.

Lack of Time

Gest believes that Oregon's school-site councils might have to work "full time" to do the work that they are being asked to do. Lack of time is already an issue for many council members. One whose council meets monthly remarks that "there's some frustration there in not having the time to feel like I can do the best job possible with it." This teacher often feels torn between duties to the council and responsibilities to students. Black notes that "scheduling is always an issue" with school-site councils, since they include such a variety of members and work schedules.

Time constraints can contribute to apathy and resentment by site council members. A Chicago principal complains that the councils have "taken far more time... I'm spending a lot of time explaining to people who have no background knowledge" (Alfred Hess and John Easton 1991). In

their study of Utah site councils, Malen and Ogawa found that teacher "members consistently described their involvement as more of an obligation than an opportunity, as more of an acquiescence to collegial-institutional pressure than a reflection of personal preference." Site councils with such members are unlikely to bring many positive changes to their schools.

Accountability

The question of school-site council's accountability is, in Conley's words, "an unanswerable dilemma." Accountability for school performance traditionally resides in the elected school board or in a single administrator: a superintendent or a principal. How does one go about making a rotating group of staff members, parents, and administrators accountable for the decisions that it makes? Should not authority be accompanied by responsibility?

Conley warns against site councils that become so enamored with participatory decision-making that they neglect the central goal of the process: improved student learning. The danger is that school-site councils, particularly those dominated by teachers, can become so focused on improving teachers' working conditions that they overlook the central issue of teacher efficacy. These two issues—teachers' happiness and teachers' efficacy—are of course closely related, but they are not synonymous.

Working Toward Solutions

None of the above difficulties is easily overcome. Solutions for some problems will come only with time, as individual school-site councils wrestle with the factors that inhibit their effectiveness. But we already know enough to begin to untangle these difficulties.

Authoritarian Principals

Principals reluctant to share their power and responsibilities with budding school-site councils deserve and require some empathy. Bradley and Olson point out that principals may feel that the creation of site councils puts them at a unique disadvantage within the district. On the one hand, they are being told to distribute power with the people that they supervise in a way that central-office staff, the people who supervise principals, are not. On the other hand, their staff are likely to enjoy more job security than they do. Conley notes that principals will likely "bear the brunt of responsibility for the achievement of goals as schools become more accountable for student performance." Principals may also resent the added work that school councils

bring. Hence principals may have some grounds for believing that the creation of school-site councils puts them in an unfair, no-win situation.

Superintendents and site councils can defuse principals' resentments over school-site councils by acknowledging that principals' roles are undergoing major changes and by taking steps to ensure that principals are treated respectfully and fairly.

Empathy and understanding from site council members cannot, however, guarantee that a principal who is dead set against sharing power with a site council will change her or his mind or ways. George Dyer, principal at South Salem (Oregon) High School, asserts that principals' unwillingness "to give up some power" is a leading pitfall that school councils face. He recommends that principals accept the ambiguity of reform: "I'm not sure where all of this is going to go." Building administrators who confront change in a positive, proactive fashion serve their schools much more faithfully than those who reactively ignore or resist it.

Factionalism

Principals' openness is a key component to defusing factionalism. The chair of a South Carolina council complained that its "biggest weakness is that we are not well enough informed" (Monrad and Norman). Principals, more than any other site council member, can remedy this problem. John Miner, principal of Barlow High School in Gresham, Oregon, asserts that "you can't communicate enough" in working through school reform. He urges principals to see change as "an evolution rather than an event" and to take pains to keep all groups within the school community informed about change. This sort of openness defuses hard feelings and factionalism, both within the school and within the school-site council.

Allowing time for all council members to state their views and feelings can also defuse factionalism. "You don't want to get in a situation where people feel like they've been ramrodded," remarks Munson. Hamblin, also a member of Mazama High School's site council, notes that they sometimes use a visual tool to break stalemates. This exercise requires members to vote among several positions by placing five tokens next to them. Members may use all five tokens on one position or distribute them more broadly. The exercise serves both to help members clarify how strongly they feel about their first choice and to see visually the group's preferences.

In general, any exercise calculated to enhance group culture and cohesiveness will help to minimize factionalism. Gest recommends that members gather for meetings over meals and that they set aside "time for informal talking as well as formal business meetings."

Issues of underrepresentation can be remedied in part by expanding a

council's size. Rather than having only one classified staff on a school council of seven members, for example, there could be two on a council of nine members.

Time

Like authoritarian principals, lack of time is a problem that lacks easy answers. Part of the solution lies in being more efficient. The meeting agenda can be mailed to members prior to the meeting, as can the minutes from the previous meeting. Assertive council chairs can keep socializing within the meeting itself to a minimum and terminate unproductive discussions.

Yet even highly efficient site council meetings can be a significant drain on members' time, particularly for staff who are overworked in the first place. Reising notes that Crater High School provides substitutes for teachers on the site council when it has extended meetings. Site council members in the state of New York recommended several other steps, including setting aside special days for council work, establishing a separate budget line for the council, and paying stipends to members "equivalent to those awarded coaches or other special assignments within the district" (Eastwood and Tallerico).

Creating more time for site council business and training almost invariably means spending more money. Districts with shrinking budgets therefore find it particularly difficult to address this stubborn problem.

Accountability

Kentucky has been a leader in trying to make school-site councils accountable for their decisions (Weston). According to its plan, schools with councils whose student performance declines a certain amount face certain consequences. An evaluator may be assigned with the power to transfer and dismiss staff. And parents may be given freedom to send their children to other schools. By the same token, schools that exceed certain levels of achievement are rewarded financially and can request waivers from some state regulations.

Accountability can be established on a more individual basis as well. Some council members in New York State recommended "incorporation of the planning team's goals and objectives into the district's personnel evaluation system" (Eastwood and Tallerico). Effective participation on the site council could become part of annual assessment instruments for principals, teachers, and other staff.

The Principal's Role on School-Site Councils

"The secret of a good council is the real interest and support a principal gives to it," asserts a South Carolina principal (Monrad and Norman). "I could easily make it a useless organization; but since I believe in it I don't." Principals can support school-site councils by encouraging communication and sharing information, sharing authority, and being effective leaders.

Communication

Principals are at the intersection of many communication networks. More than any other staff members, they are privy to district-level decisions and policies. They also relate closely to a broad spectrum of school staff and parents. More than any other council members, they are apt to have specialized knowledge about how large groups work.

Principals can greatly strengthen their site councils by sharing this information and knowledge with them. Smith has done this by creating a bibliography on group process skills for the Reynolds High School site council. He also regularly distributes handouts that address both the group process and the content of issues that the council is grappling with. "What makes the site council succeed," concludes Lew Armistead (1994) "is the information it gets from the principal about board actions, the curriculum, student performance, etc."

Sharing Authority

George Dyer, principal of South Salem (Oregon) High School, says that "the best way to end power struggles is to empower people." John Easton and his colleagues (1993) assert that principals best serve site councils by being active but not authoritarian participants, and they recommend that principals share site council leadership with the council chairperson.

Using an example from their study of Tennessee site councils, Carol Etheridge and her colleagues (1990) paint a verbal picture of how such leadership might work:

> The principal allowed and encouraged all council representatives to bring issues to the council for open discussion. While each participant argued for his position, each willingly and without hostility modified his position or acquiesced to others in the face of strong, logical argument.
>
> The democratic principal guided the council and teachers toward pre-established and evolving, but agreed upon, goals by building a sense of community and shared decision-making.

Even a principal determined to share authority with other members of a site council may experience distrust and resistance. Members of councils in New York State acknowledged that they commonly tested administrators on site councils to see how deeply their commitment to sharing authority went. One explained that "this testing is only a reaction to wasting staff time on programs that are only notches in the resumé of the here today—gone tomorrow administrator" (Eastwood and Tallerico). In sum, only a sustained commitment to sharing authority with other site council members can convince suspicious staff members of the principal's sincerity.

The creation of school-site councils still leaves intact many of a principal's traditional duties. The McMinnville School District in Oregon specified in 1991 that its principals are responsible for:

1. Supervising and evaluating staff members
2. The school's day-to-day operation
3. Hiring staff
4. The school's compliance to district, state, and federal policies
5. The school's instructional leadership (Oregon School Boards Association, n.d.)

This list is longer in some states with school-site councils, shorter in others.

Principals' Leadership

Even principals who emphasize their commitment to shared decision-making hasten to add that they have a special role on their site councils. Smith urges principals to "generate the excitement around intellectual excitement and understanding" for site councils. "The principal always has a special role of being a sort of cheerleader and encourager" on site councils, asserts Flint. Such principals eagerly use their knowledge and authority to assist their site councils.

The Kansas State Board of Education (1992) outlines the principal's leadership role in building successful site councils:

1. Helping to build a shared vision
2. Attending regularly and actively participating
3. Providing lots of information on the school and on district and state policies
4. Securing necessary support services for the council
5. Providing council members with training opportunities

It urges principals to be sensitive to the power of their position, such as establishing "an *expectation* that disagreements may be inevitable in creative problem solving and shared decision-making." In sum, principals can use

their experience in and knowledge of group decision-making to smooth the council's pathway into that role.

Other Council Members' Roles

Principals are not the only members of the school community whose roles shift when they become members of school-site councils. Staff members and parents will also be participating in new, often unfamiliar, ways. These people's backgrounds will affect how they should prepare for the duties that accompany membership on a school-site council.

Staff Members

Conley advises teachers who are participating in school decision-making to attain the training necessary to succeed at it. That training could include group communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution. He also asks teachers to accept the difficult side of decision-making. "Along with greater authority over learning conditions" may well come "greater accountability for results," he notes. Teachers who are accustomed to working under authoritarian principals may have a particularly difficult transition to make on school-site councils.

Jan Hamblin, a school secretary and site council chair, points out that classified staff members may be particularly reluctant to participate on site councils. She asserts that classified staff commonly work with many elements of the school but do not realize the knowledge that such exposure allows them to bring to a site council. Classified staff may be perceived by others and themselves as being subordinate, but "by virtue of this very subordinance" they can be empathetic to issues that students often feel and that more powerful staff members may not perceive.

Classified staff and teachers typically have much learning to do once they assume positions on site councils, but they should also be sensitive to their unique strengths.

Parents

Parent members of school-site councils, too, must walk a fine line between ill-informed and premature activism on the one hand and passivity on the other. As Jan Baxter, principal at Hollydale School in Gresham, Oregon, puts it, "You can't have someone come in who is going to try and run the school." By the same token, a parent who simply fills up her or his term by listening to others is taking up space.

Peggy Upham, a parent member of a site council, urges parents not to go into service on councils "with an agenda." "Go and listen" to begin with,

not "with the notion of changing everything." This respectful, learning-oriented approach smooths relations with staff members who may be wary of parent involvement in decision-making. It also serves as an education that increasingly qualifies parents or other community members for full participation on the council.

Gayland Gump, also a parent member of a site council, points out that much of that education can occur before joining a council. "It's pointless as a parent to walk in there without some sort of understanding of what's got to change," he argues. Gump asserts that parents often bring to the council substantial experience as educators and group members. All have taught their children, after all, and many have substantial job experience in these fields.

Parents, says Gump, bring a "whole new perspective" to site councils. "We have a different agenda than educators," he explains. For example, he notes that he tends "to see fewer obstacles to change because I'm not part of that [education] system." Parents can more easily see the big picture while staff members may find that "everything is too immediate and too present."

Knowledge, whether gained before or after one's election to a site council, is a key to effective membership, particularly for members outside the school staff.

Earning Authority

Smith speaks eloquently of how site-council members rightfully earn the authority to make decisions that guide the school. "Empowerment is not giving people permission to participate in decision-making," he says. Rather, empowerment comes out of and arises from participation. It is "a process of assumption rather than a process of anointment." Wielding legitimate power comes not through title or position, but through effort, learning, and service.

This insight—that power is rightfully wielded by the assumption of responsibilities rather than anointment to a position—is very powerful. It can defuse conflicts and clarify members' roles. Creating and maintaining a successful school-site council is very difficult. It is nearly impossible if council members do not devote themselves to cooperation rather than individualism, to earning authority rather than fighting over it.

The challenges of blending teachers, classified staff members, administrators, and teachers into an effective team can be overstated. Sandy Speasl, a teacher at Crater High School in Central Point, Oregon, remarks that "site councils help blur the line" between the groups. She enjoys the "camaraderie of working together toward a decision," and particularly "working with the parents." If properly handled, the different backgrounds within a site council can become a strength.

Chapter 4

School-Site Councils and the Wider School Community

Site councils do not exist in a vacuum. As we have seen, they often wield authority that had previously been exercised by the principal alone. But their effect on other groups and people goes, or at least should go, further than that. Site councils relate to other decision-making bodies within a school district, most obviously the school board. The council's influence also reaches to others in the school community: staff members, parent organizations, and others.

This chapter is devoted to exploring the links between school-site councils and other groups within the district and school. It treats relations with parents, school staff, and district-level organizations. It closes with an examination of school-site councils and district policy.

School-Site Councils and Parents

Parents participate in most site councils. In Chicago, parents and other community members must constitute a majority of the councils' membership. Yet only a small fraction of qualified parents will sit on site councils. "It's not like everybody can be involved in site-based management" directly, notes Marilyn Higgins, volunteer coordinator at the Oregon Department of Education. She urges council members, particularly parent members, to connect the council to the broader school community.

Parent Peggy Upham notes several links between Roosevelt Middle School's site council and its parents. Parents on that council regularly report to the school's parent council, which meets monthly. The Kansas State Board of Education (n.d.) urges site councils to use booths at school functions, newsletters, and brochures to communicate with the broader school community.

Zerchykov offers an extensive list of steps for school councils to take in facilitating community inclusiveness:

1. Follow the state open meeting laws even if site councils are exempt from such laws.
2. Exceed the requirements of open meeting laws by giving earlier and more extensive notice of the meeting than demanded.
3. Take some time at each meeting to gather the thoughts of non-member attenders on what should be on the next meeting's agenda.
4. Post meeting minutes in a public place.
5. Undertake regular assessments of school and community needs.
6. Devote a portion of each meeting to public comment.
7. Create subcommittees with extended memberships.
8. Don't make big decisions at a single meeting, but instead give members time to consult with constituents between meetings.

Such steps can help to stimulate interest in the site committee throughout the school community. The steps can also serve as a way of tapping the expertise and energy of many more people than could serve on the school-site committee at any one time.

The School-Site Council and School Staff

A school's staff is of course much smaller and more cohesive than its parent community. These factors facilitate a close relationship between the school-site council and school staff, but they do not ensure it.

Many site councils routinely or as a matter of policy consult with faculty or staff before making final decisions. Counselor Sharon Quackenbush says that the Lost River Junior/Senior High School site council "won't make major decisions without their [the staff's] input." Teacher Anne Powell, who serves on the same council, notes that council members discuss council business at department meetings, a process facilitated by each staff member receiving a copy of the site council's agenda in their school mailbox. Hence "there's a lot of communication" about council business among the staff as a whole.

Mazama High School has taken particular pains to structure a close relationship between its school-site council and the immediate school community. The site chair empties a school suggestion box before every meeting, ensuring that every recommendation or complaint will be considered. Most notably, the school features a weekly "academic seminar" open to all certified and classified staff and, at times, to selected students. This schoolwide meeting, as Principal Bob Simonson points out, constitutes a direct, ongoing

link between the school community and the school-site council. In this forum all staff members have the opportunity to speak out on the issues before the school, to shape new policies through the force and persuasiveness of their arguments. Standing and ad hoc committees chaired by site council members provide the means for detailed research and consideration of particular measures.

This sort of involvement requires a lot of time, but it often results in council decisions that are thoroughly researched and fully supported. "The more involvement you can get from all of your staff, the better your site council will be," concludes teacher Sandy Speasl.

The School-Site Council and the District

We have already addressed how school-site councils can become responsible for decisions that principals had once made on their own. Site councils may also need to work out how their responsibilities may overlap with those of more longstanding school-level organizations, such as parent organizations or school reform committees.

School-site councils will also find themselves relating to district-level decision-makers: the superintendent, other central-office administrators, and the school board. "Once they [site councils] get going, you'll see more bumping" into district-level decision-makers, predicts Conley. Such friction can be a sign of growth, not just stress. Site councils and districts can take steps to help ensure that this growth and stress are positive.

Site Councils and the Central Office

"We go as far as we dare," remarks Sharon Quackenbush of the decisions that her site council makes. But she also points out that the council consistently presents its ideas "through channels," that it works openly with the central office and school board rather than trying to work around them. The Oregon School Boards Association (n.d.) notes that "if communication lines are open, and administration and board remain fully informed about process and decisions being shared, then there should be no need for veto situations." This sort of openness means that "problems can be remedied prior to impasse and sent back to the committee for resolution."

District administrators can take the lead in ensuring that the work of site councils and the district mesh rather than clash. The Kansas State Board of Education specifies some steps for the superintendent and school board to take in this process:

1. Coordinating meetings of all site councils to assess their work
2. Clearly defining the purposes of the site councils

3. Demonstrating support of the site councils by attending council meetings
4. Providing information on district-level policies and resources
5. Regularly reviewing the work of site councils
6. Offering training and other assistance
7. Acknowledging and rewarding the work of site council members through certificates, press releases, or other methods

Such steps both strengthen links between the superintendent and the site councils and provide a venue for helping to shape the site councils.

School-Site Councils and the School Board

The presence of school-site councils does not undercut or overturn the school board's ultimate authority. The Oregon Task Force Report (1993) puts it plainly: "The school board's legal authority and responsibility are maintained." At the same time, as the Educational Research Service (1991) points out, the board should "resist the temptation to overturn school-based decisions unless the decisions are in direct conflict with the mission of the district."

School boards can take the initiative in their dealings with school-site councils. The Greater Albany Public School District (Oregon School Boards Association) has stipulated that schools planning to form a council submit to the board an application. The application must include such information as the council's composition, selection processes, duties, decision-making mechanisms, and evaluation tools. These types of requirements help the board to establish strong communication links with councils from the outset.

School boards can offer leadership to site councils. The Oregon School Boards Association lists ten actions that board members can take to support site councils:

1. Unconditionally support the superintendent.
2. Provide startup resources.
3. Receive training in how to share authority.
4. Set clear expectations through policy decisions.
5. Move people and money into the schools.
6. Define clearly the site councils' parameters.
7. Participate in making shared decisions.
8. Support risk-takers.
9. Reward collaborators.
10. Teach others how to do shared decision-making.

Such proactive steps can help a district's site councils get off to a good start.

Policy Implications of School-Site Councils

School-site councils potentially wield a great deal of authority and power. They can therefore do a great deal of harm, not only by making poor decisions, but by exceeding the limits of their authority. Districtwide policy guidelines can help to ensure that councils work productively within their intended scope of responsibility.

Bill Kentta, curriculum and staff development coordinator at the Eugene (Oregon) Public Schools, asserts that it is "absolutely necessary" for a district to establish policy on how site councils fit into its structure. "If you don't have a mechanism in place, you're just asking for trouble," he concludes.

Such policy mechanisms specify what site councils can and cannot decide. Oregon's Eagle Point School District recently specified that site councils "as a general rule" should not make decisions that supersede board policy, deviate from "agreed upon district-wide curricula and staff development programs," require a "reallocation of budgeted building expenditures," "reallocate personnel," or "conflict with the district's strategic plan" (Oregon School Boards Association). This district, like others, gives school councils the opportunity to request waivers from district policy, however.

District policy may also specify roles for superintendents, principals, and site councils. The McMinnville Public School District passed a policy in 1991 charging the superintendent with delineating the responsibilities of the central office, principal, and site council (Oregon School Boards Association). The Oregon School Boards Association recommends that site councils be involved in hiring and budgeting, but not in staff evaluation or firing.

Finally, and most important, district policy should be based on a district vision. "There should be a district vision and a school version" of it, asserts Jim Carnes, director of school board leadership and school improvement for the Oregon School Boards Association. In other words, the board should be clear about the district's overall goals. School councils can then develop school visions within that larger district vision. This sort of coordination brings "alignment" and "power" in schools throughout the district, he points out.

Conclusion

This Bulletin is based largely on the grassroots experiences of a variety of school-site council members. Such people are genuinely excited about the work of these site councils, even as they detail the difficulties of collective decision-making. They speak of principals learning to share power, of teachers learning to assert themselves openly, of classified staff members realizing and contributing their unique strengths, and of parents becoming an integral part of the school. They speak of barriers between these groups coming down, of longstanding mutual suspicions being put to rest. And, most important, they speak of sound decisions that have been thoroughly debated and that enjoy the broad support of the larger school community. School-site councils can be a key component of effective school reform.

But it is also clear that school-site councils demand a great deal of commitment, time, and skill before they can fulfill their promise. Principals must be open to sharing authority. All participants must be willing to invest a great deal of time. Quality training in group processing must be secured. Communication links with the larger school community must be forged. Site councils demand a major commitment of school resources, and the goodwill of a great many players. School-site councils can accomplish a great many things, but they cannot create the conditions that they themselves require. Councils are unlikely to generate enthusiasm for meaningful school reform if such enthusiasm is not already building.

Certain broad principles apply more or less to all site councils: the need for training and for a well-defined relationship with the district, for example. But the composition, the decision-making process, and the actual work of a given site council depend on local variables. Carl Marburger (1985) describes school-based management as "a *process*, not a prescription." "There is no right way to implement it," he notes, "because the central theory behind it is the belief that each district and each school within that district is unique."

As we have seen, school site-councils and school-based management

are not one and the same. But Marburger's generalization applies to both movements. A great strength of school-site councils is their potential responsiveness to local conditions and local requirements.

That strength is only potential because it is contingent on effective participation by local people. Effective participation requires a dedication of time, a willingness to learn, and an openness to the group process—to accepting that one will have to compromise and negotiate even on strongly held beliefs and opinions.

School-site councils, then, are not only an important component of effective school reform. They are a test of the vitality of the democratic process.

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